

## Evolution of Kuki Chin National Front as a Separatist Group and Impact on National and Regional Security

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Source: Security Risk Asia

### Introduction

The insurrection of the terrorist organization Kuki Chin National (KNF) Front has added a new dimension to the national security of Bangladesh. Kuki Chin is a cluster of several ethnic groups living mainly in the Sylhet and Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, the north-eastern states of India, and the Chin state of Myanmar. These ethnic communities of the Tibeto-Burman language group are known by different names in these regions. In India, they are known as Kukis. However, in Mizoram State of India, they are known as Mizo and Chin in Myanmar. Complex boundaries of post-colonial states have created a devastating situation for many groups, especially the efforts

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to distill ethnic autonomy into statehood.<sup>2</sup> In 2008, KNF was established as a nonprofit organization by Nathan Bom; however, later, it evolved into an insurgency group wanting to create a separate county in the Hill tracts of Bangladesh for the Kuki Chin people. KNF came to the spotlight after two soldiers were killed by the Kuki National Army, opening a window to a new national security threat.<sup>3</sup>

This commentary briefly overviews the background and evolution of KNF from a non-profit to a terrorist organization. It discusses the emerging national security threat through the recent uprising of this terrorist group. Its purpose is to explore the challenges and responses to this national security threat.

## **Kuki Chin National Front: From a Non-Profit Organization to a Terrorist Organization**

Ethnic groups named the Bawm, Pangkhua, Lusai, Khumi, Mro, and Kiang comprise the KNF. Locally this group is also known as the Bawm party, and they consider themselves the original inhabitants of the hill tracks. Although the Chakma and Marmas are the majority ethnic group, the Kuki Chins view them as outsiders and claim that Chakmas and Marmas have come from India and Myanmar.<sup>4</sup>



**Nathan Bom [Source: Dhaka Tribune]**

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<sup>2</sup> Telsing Letkhosei Haokip, Ethnic separatism: The kuki-chin insurgency of indo ... - researchgate, February 2015, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273513503\\_Ethnic\\_Separatism\\_The\\_Kuki-Chin\\_Insurgency\\_of\\_Indo-MyanmarBurma](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273513503_Ethnic_Separatism_The_Kuki-Chin_Insurgency_of_Indo-MyanmarBurma).

<sup>3</sup> TBS Report, “Explainer: Who Are the Kuki-Chin Army in Chittagong Hill Tracts?,” The Business Standard, May 17, 2023, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/who-are-kuki-chin-army-chittagong-hill-tracts-633414>.

<sup>4</sup> “KNF Disrupting Tourism, Development Works in Bandarban,” NewsArchive, March 20, 2023, <https://newsarchive.app/a/dhakatribune/2023/3/20/KNF-disrupting-tourism-development-works-in-Bandarban>.

KNF started its journey as a development organization named Kuki-Chin National Development Organization (KNDO) in 2008. Nathan Bom was its founding president. He was a student at Dhaka University, and during his university days, he was an active member of the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity's student organization Pahari Chhatra Parishad (PCP). Later in 2018, he was elected as the first independent candidate from the Bom community.<sup>5</sup> KNDO aimed to ensure minor Kuki Chin communities' economic development and rights and stop land-grabbing incidents.



Proposed map of 'Kuki-Chin' state: [Source: Mahababu.com]

Later in 2017, KNF was established as a separatist group, and the group continued armed activities to separate the hill tracks from Bangladesh.<sup>6</sup> They have claimed nine Upazila as their territory. They are - Baghaichari, Barkal, Belaichari, Rangamati and Jurachari and Ruma, Thanchi, Alikadam and Rowangchhari of Bandarban.<sup>7</sup> They have also published a map and a "Kuki Chin State" flag.

<sup>5</sup> "Kuki-Chin National Army: A Fierce Regional Threat in Sight - Op-Ed," The Daily Observer, May 23, 2023, <https://www.observerbd.com/news.php?id=420588>.

<sup>6</sup> "Emergence of the KNF in Chittagong Hill Tracts," Mahabahu.com, June 3, 2022, <https://mahabahu.com/brief-history-of-emergence-of-the-knf-in-chittagong/>.

<sup>7</sup> 1. "KNF in Chattogram Hill Tracts - Op-Ed," The Daily Observer, November 23, 2022, <https://www.observerbd.com/news.php?id=394182>.

KNF has evolved into an organized separatist organization by forming two wings. One is the political wing, KNF, and the other is the military wing, KNA. According to local media, they have 2000 armed soldiers carrying heavy weapons like AK-47s in the Jampui hills of Bandarban. They have taken their training from Karen rebel groups in Manipur State and Myanmar which strengthened their ties with a like-minded group in this region.<sup>8</sup> This separatist group came to light when they killed several Chakma leaders, and later on this year, two Soldiers of the Bangladesh army were killed, and 2 Army Officers were gravely injured on May 16. They fired directly on Bangladesh Army and used Explosives during an ongoing dispute between the Meitei community of Manipur and the tribal Kuki ethnic community.<sup>9</sup>

## **KNF's Resurface to the Scene: A National Security Threat**

Recently, KNF has emerged as a new national and regional security threat as they are active in an isolated area near the border. Bangladesh shares 318 kilometers of border with Mizoram of, India, home to several like-minded organizations. On the other hand, this hill track area also shares a border with Myanmar. They disagreed with the peace accord 1997 and demanded full authority over the separate Hill tracks, creating a major national security threat. Furthermore, they have threatened the government to fulfill their demands; otherwise, this region will face more bloodshed.<sup>10</sup>

## **Crimes commenced by KNF**

Due to killings, abduction, and torture, the overall situation of the hill tracks has worsened. These crimes have affected tourism, development works, agriculture, transportation, education, and

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<sup>8</sup> "KNF Disrupting Tourism, Development Works in Bandarban," NewsArchive, March 20, 2023, <https://newsarchive.app/a/dhakatribune/2023/3/20/KNF-disrupting-tourism-development-works-in-Bandarban>.

<sup>9</sup> Star Digital Report, "2 Army Men Killed in Kuki-Chin Nat'l Army Attack in Bandarban: ISPR," The Daily Star, May 17, 2023, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/2-army-men-killed-kuki-chin-natl-army-attack-bandarban-ispr-3322356>.

<sup>10</sup> "Emergence of the KNF in Chittagong Hill Tracts," Mahabahu.com, June 3, 2022, <https://mahabahu.com/brief-history-of-emergence-of-the-knf-in-chittagong/>.

people's livelihood. Bangladesh Army and RAB have launched a joint operation against the KNF, the most prominent anti-terror operation in recent times.<sup>11</sup>



Seized weapons from Joint Operation. [Source: OurtimeBD]

KNF has already attacked other ethnic groups, claiming they are not initially from Chittagong Hill tracts. They are also hostile towards political groups like Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) and UPDF. Furthermore, the leaders of KNF are all Christians, but the other political organization, such as JSS, are led by Buddhist Chakmas. This situation creates a chance of inter-ethnic group conflict, which will destabilize the hill track areas.

Heavily armed members of the Kuki-Chin National Army (KNA) are challenging the joint operation. According to the reports of Daily Sun, two soldiers were killed, and KNA injured two

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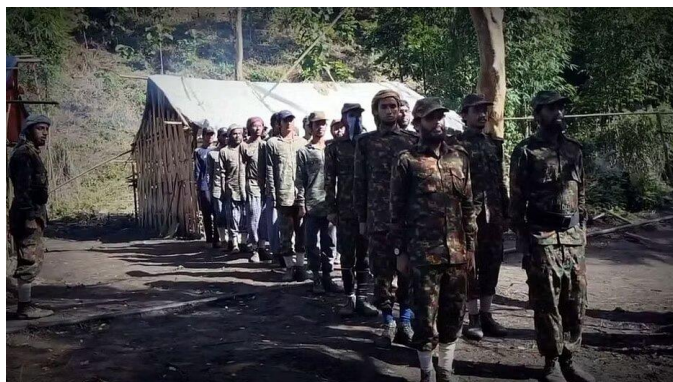
<sup>11</sup> “Operation of Joint Forces in Hills of Bangladesh: KNF Forced to Retreat,” United News of India, October 19, 2002, <http://www.uniindia.com/operation-of-joint-forces-in-hills-of-bangladesh-knf-forced-to-retreat/world/news/2845463.html>.

officers in May. Earlier in March, master warrant officer Nazim Uddin was killed, and two soldiers were wounded by the open firing of KNA on the army patrol team.<sup>12</sup>

People are taking refuge in Bandarban and neighboring state districts. According to the reports of Dhaka Tribune, “Since November 15 last year, at least 548 people from 132 families have taken refuge in Mizoram. On January 28, some 140 Marma women, men, and children took refuge in Ruma Sadar from Mulpi Para, but they returned to their homes on February 5. On March 10, around 220 people of 56 families from Barathli 4 Union of Rangamati’s Bilaichhari took shelter in Tangchangya Reichha and Rowangchhari Sadar Upazila in fear of the armed activities by the KNF members.”<sup>13</sup>

## **Affiliation between KNF and Jama’atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya**

Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya and the KNF have formed an alliance that threatens national security. his Islamic militant group is taking training from KNF in the Hill Tracks. RAB arrested seven members of Jama’tul Sharqiya and three members of KNF in October; they have also found 38 missing people who joined the training from different districts of Bangladesh.<sup>14</sup>



Jama’atul Ansar is taking training from KNA in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. [Source: bdnews24.com]

The leader of Jama’atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya, Shamin Mahfuz, was close to the leader of the Kuki-Chin National Front or the Bawm Party, Nathan Bom, when they used to study at Dhaka

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<sup>12</sup> “2 Army Men Killed in KNA Attack in Bandarban | Print Version - Daily Sun,” Daily Sun, May 18, 2023, <https://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/689913/2-army-men-killed-in-KNA-attack-in-Bandarban>.

<sup>13</sup> “KNF Disrupting Tourism, Development Works in Bandarban,” NewsArchive, March 20, 2023, <https://newsarchive.app/a/dhakatribune/2023/3/20/KNF-disrupting-tourism-development-works-in-Bandarban>.

<sup>14</sup> Sharmili Mahjabeen, “Kuki-Chin Resurgence in Chittagong Hill Tracts: A New Threat to Regional Security,” Organiser, June 16, 2023, <https://organiser.org/2023/06/16/177369/bharat/kuki-chin-resurgence-in-chittagong-hill-tracts-a-new-threat-to-regional-security/>.

University. According to the report of the police's CTTC unit, these two leaders engaged in affiliation. They made a deal in a hotel of Cox's Bazar of KNF, giving shelter, training, and providing arms to the Islamic militant in exchange for money. The report added that 70-80 new members had been recruited to achieve a strong position in the hill tracts. They aim to participate in military training and carry out terrorist attacks in the districts of Chittagong Hill tracts.<sup>15</sup>



Jama'atul Ansar is taking training from KNA in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. [Source: bdnews24.com]

After the terrorist attack on Holey Artisan, many counter-terrorist approaches have been taken throughout these years. Security forces have conducted 15 separate operations, and 64 terrorists of the New JMB were killed.<sup>16</sup> These operations conducted by security forces have ensured a noticeable decrease in terrorist activities in Bangladesh. But the actual scenario is that terrorist activities are under control, but they are not extinct. The alliance between Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya and KNF has opened the door to many critical possibilities-

**Firstly**, this alliance can facilitate both groups to rise as more threatening terrorist groups. The KNF is giving training to Jama'atul Ansar, which is making the Islamic militant group stronger, as well as; it has become an earning source for KNF. This money will enhance their capability as a terrorist group as they can purchase more arms, ammunition, and other logistics required to conduct their armed operation.

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<sup>15</sup> "Militant Group Jamatul Ansar's Founder Shamin Mahfuz Arrested in Dhaka," bdnews24.com, accessed August 2, 2023, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/sl8n4qr23v>.

<sup>16</sup> Tipu Sultan, "আল-কায়েদাপহীদের নিয়েই এখন দুশ্চিন্তা," Prothomalo, accessed August 5, 2023, <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/crime/7a95b3bsvx>.

**Secondly**, KNF is a separatist group active in the Chittagong hill tracts, but its affiliation with Jama'atul Ansar enables them to conduct operations in the urban areas. This might help them create more allies, raise funds, and create more connections around the country.

**Thirdly**, the Islamic militants will return to the urban area after training in the hill tracts and strengthen the militancy by training the recruits. As they conduct operations to achieve their cause, law enforcement will be busy countering terrorist activities of Jama'atul Ansar, and KNF will use this opportunity to strengthen their army so that they can move toward their goal of creating an independent Zumaland on the borders of Bangladesh-India and Bangladesh-Myanmar.<sup>17</sup>

## **A New Threat to Regional Security?**

Due to the joint operation, the physical presence of KNF has decreased, and they may retreat in the future. However, KNF is determined to continue their cause, and they plan to gain strength and come back stronger than ever. They might expand throughout the region to achieve this goal and affiliate with like-minded groups in Mizoram and Chin. KNF will likely evolve into a transnational entity. Mizoram and Chin, on the other hand, have been dealing with insurgency problems for a long time, and having transnational terrorism activity will only make the situation worse. As KNF has the potential to expand its activity in this region, it is not only seen as a threat to Bangladesh's national security. Because of the interconnectedness of this region and the presence of this ethnic group in these states, it can emerge as a regional security threat. This insurgency group has already gotten involved in arms and drug trafficking and many other crimes. So, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and India should take steps jointly and nip this regional threat in the bud.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Indrajit Kumar, "When KNF (Kuki-Chin National Front) Is a Threat to Peaceful Cht (Chittagong Hill Tracts) in Bangladesh," South Asia Journal, June 20, 2023, <https://southasiajournal.net/when-knf-kuki-chin-national-front-is-a-threat-to-peaceful-cht-chittagong-hill-tracts-in-bangladesh/>.

<sup>18</sup> Doreen Chowdhury, "KNF - a New Threat to Regional Security: CGS," Bay of Bengal Conversation, November 29, 2022, <https://cgs-bd.com/article/10367/KNF-%E2%80%94-A-New-Threat-to-Regional-Security>.



## **Conclusion**

Recent unrest in the hilly districts of Bangladesh has created a national and regional security threat. Furthermore, the situation worsened when security forces discovered the affiliation between KNF and Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya. Though these two groups' ideologies and aims differ, the collaboration benefits them both and helps them to increase their capabilities. The situation is getting harder daily as this affiliation poses a more significant threat. The government should take necessary steps by digging into the root of the problem and should handle the situation not only by military attacks but also with proper strategy. There is a possibility that KNF will evolve into a transnational entity, and then alongside Bangladesh, this issue will be a concern for India and Myanmar. The Governments of these states should cooperate and address this issue from the beginning.